

Dialogue

The Rhetoric of Free Association and Palau's Political Struggle

RICHARD J. PARMENTIER

Natives and Anthropologists: The Colonial Struggle

HAUNANI-KAY TRASK

Reply to Trask

ROGER M. KEESING

Text Bites and the R-Word: The Politics of Representing Scholarship

JOCELYN LINNEKIN

The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 1991, 145–177
© 1991 by University of Hawai'i Press

*Text Bites and the R-Word:
The Politics of Representing Scholarship*

Jocelyn Linnekin

More than one student at this university has noted the personal nature and the frequency of Haunani-Kay Trask's attacks on me with some puzzlement, since Trask and I are often saying the same things about the colonial impact in Hawai'i. Professor Trask (like most anthropologists) doesn't like missionaries much and (like myself; see Linnekin 1982) has decried tourism and the commoditization of culture in Hawai'i. Nevertheless, Trask has been attacking and misrepresenting me with a vengeance for several years now. From the micropolitical perspective her attacks have never seemed motivated by terribly high principles, not even the lofty principle of race. Even in her celebratory review of Marshall Sahlins' *Islands of History*, Trask (1985) inserts a wholly gratuitous and dishonest dig at me. I certainly find it ironic that she blames me—the junior female anthropologist—for misleading the older male anthropologists, Sahlins and Keesing.

I have been more fortunate than Professor Keesing. Trask has not yet flung her ultimate weapon at me: the dreaded R-word. Given my known support and encouragement of local, Hawaiian, and Pacific Islands students and my level of community involvement on behalf of Hawaiian causes, she perhaps senses that this tack would be difficult even for her to sustain. There are intellectual issues at stake in this debate, however, and they are not easily summed up by text bites and name calling.

Firstly, with due respect to Professor Keesing, I think that he misreads and misuses the invention-of-tradition literature. Writers in this genre explicitly and repeatedly reject the premise that anthropologists are privileged to define a "real" or "authentic past . . . real ways of life" (Keesing 1989, 35) that people in the present distort. I have never advocated and in fact have explicitly rejected this position (see Linnekin 1985, 240–241). The construction of culture idea demands, rather, that we recognize that all knowledge is situated in a particular historical and political context,

that all traditions are subject to creative human interpretation as a part of social life. Within contemporary social science, these were radical insights that have contributed to an anticolonial and antihegemonic discourse. Anthropology has long been the most obsessively self-critical discipline in the academy, and proponents of the invention-of-culture paradigm have been among the most eager to undermine its authority to say anything with certainty. Keesing cites the piece I wrote with Richard Handler, but he does not appear to have read it very carefully, for in it we concluded:

Traditions are neither genuine nor spurious, for if genuine tradition refers to pristine and immutable heritage of the past, then all genuine traditions are spurious. But if . . . tradition is always defined in the present, then all spurious traditions are genuine. Genuine and spurious—terms that have been used to distinguish objective reality from hocus-pocus—are inappropriate when applied to social phenomena, which never exist apart from our interpretations of them. (Handler and Linnekin 1984, 288)

The notion of the contemporary construction of culture did not originate in anthropology, incidentally, but reflects a widespread dissatisfaction in the social sciences with reified concepts and the positivist paradigm. The issue in the invention-of-tradition literature is not authenticity, but the very nature of culture, culture change, and cultural process. Keesing (1987) has elsewhere critiqued interpretivism's failure to address political and economic causalities. I share some of his misgivings. Hawaiian land alienation is not a "text," nor are the other effects of colonization in Hawai'i "tropes." However, to me at least, the notion of cultural construction does not obviate speaking of history or oppression; it implies that we should adopt a less hierarchical and more "dialogic" narrative form.

The second issue in this debate is the use and representation of scholarship outside the academy. The criteria that many of us consider hallmarks of good scholarship—the exploration of distinction and ambiguity, the weighing of arguments, the rejection of easy answers—make social-scientific work inherently ill suited to the uses of political rhetoric, which looks for "text bites"¹ and catchphrases. Paradoxically, however, this explanatory complexity also makes social-science scholarship subject to multiple readings by others acting in pursuit of their own interests, at both ends of the ideological spectrum. Anthropologists cannot fully predict or guard against these interested uses, but we must be aware that our work, like other meanings in the public domain, is subject to the same active inter-

pretation and cultural construction that we have identified elsewhere in social life.

Thirdly, as much as I support Trask's political goals (she is a frequent invited speaker in my course on contemporary Hawai'i, wherein her writings are assigned and featured approvingly), it is time to dispense with her canards about anthropology. Trask's tarring of "anthropology" relies on a highly selective use of details to create straw men, straw women, and a straw discipline.² Although Trask claims to disparage "anthropologists," her own intellectual debt to anthropology is considerable, as evidenced, for example, in her "Cultures in Collision" article (Trask 1983), which relies extensively on Stanley Diamond's (1974) *In Search of the Primitive* to reconstruct ancient Hawaiian society. Stanley Diamond never wrote anything about Hawai'i, but Trask nonetheless finds his generalized model of "primitive" society eminently useful. Her laudatory review of *Islands of History* certainly belies her proclaimed antipathy to anthropology.

Indeed, Trask's characterization of Hawaiian tradition is strikingly similar to my own. In her critique she writes:

What constitutes 'tradition' to a people is ever-changing. Culture is not static, nor is it frozen in objectified moments in time. Without doubt, Hawaiians were transformed drastically and irreparably after contact, but remnants of earlier lifeways, including values and symbols, have persisted.

This is precisely the position expressed in my article as well as my book:

Tradition is always changing, not simply because of internal or external social change, but because it is interpreted anew in each generation. (Linnekin 1985, 241)

Hawaiian culture reproduces itself in the crucial categorical relations between commodities and between people. . . . What changes and what stays the same is a matter of values—what society considers important, desirable, and high. (Linnekin 1985, 247)

To prove the villainy of anthropology Trask must paint with broad strokes indeed, attempting to tar contract archaeologists, osteologists, and ethnologists with the same brush. The irony is that I and at least some of my archaeologist colleagues at the university have expended some energy over the past several years *critiquing* the work of contract archaeologists and arguing persistently for the preservation of Hawaiian sites.

Many of us have stated publicly that there are grave ethical problems in the way contract archaeology is practiced in Hawai'i. Of course, those of us who enjoy academic employment do not have to worry about sullyng ourselves by collaborating with the system. Trask even attempts to lay the emotional reburials issue at the door of "anthropologists"—a curious targeting that makes me wonder if she understands who is in power in Hawai'i (it isn't academics). Ironically—again—over the past several years anthropologists have consistently been among those testifying on behalf of bills setting rules for developers' treatment of cultural and human remains. I am not a physical anthropologist, but I know that at least a few "natives" think osteological analysis might possibly produce information beneficial to modern Hawaiians. To accuse people who argue this position of insensitivity and imperialism is unfair in the extreme. As her other proof of anthropological villainy, Trask states that my 1983 *American Ethnologist* article was used by a report on the significance of Kaho'olawe written (in 1985) for the United States Navy (Keene 1986). Though I do not make a public display of my community activities, it is worth noting that at the request of the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana I wrote a lengthy critique of that report in a letter to the Navy. Trask also omits any mention of my other work (eg, Linnekin 1987), which provides detailed analysis and statistical documentation of Hawaiian land alienation.

Contrary to Trask's portrayal and perhaps our own wishes, however, it must be admitted that scholarship—when it is used at all—is most often used politically to confirm preconceptions and rationalize decisions already made by the powers that be. Anthropologists need to be aware of our own political context and to spell out what we mean; in this context Keesing's remarks on "spurious pasts and false histories" (1989, 24) seem ill advised. But we must also recognize that anthropologists have very limited power to control public representations or to influence the course of events. Speaking from my own experience, if anthropologists' cautions and critiques were heeded, there would be (for example) less tourist development in rural areas, more preservation of historic sites, and more credence placed in Hawaiian genealogical claims to land.

Anthropologists may perhaps be consoled by the knowledge that, although Haunani-Kay Trask denies us approval (or, more accurately, some of us), there are others who also do not love us. In Hawai'i there are developers, missionary descendants, prodevelopment planners, bureaucrats, big landowners, and high-priced lawyers who find our advocacy of

cultural preservation and indigenous rights to be a nuisance and an irritation, if not the impediment that we might wish. If anthropology is so pernicious, Trask may wish to consider why the Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation, Legal Aid, and lawyers working for Hawaiians have so often used me as an unpaid consultant, advocate, and witness. I do find it curious that, in a university that boasts a School of Travel Industry Management, a School of Business Administration, and a Hawaii Real Estate Research and Education Center, Trask has decided that "anthropologists" merit her special condemnation.

Notes

1 Observers of the 1988 American electoral campaign will recall the importance of "sound bites" in media coverage of candidates' speeches. These are short, quotable statements tailored explicitly to the time constraints of television reporting. The media consultants' wisdom is that they should be no more than ten seconds long.

2 Should anyone suspect that Trask's (1986) "review" of my first book, *Children of the Land*, is a fair or honest appraisal, there is a simple test: read the book (Linnekin 1985).

References

Diamond, Stanley

1974 *In Search of the Primitive*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

Handler, Richard, and Jocelyn Linnekin

1984 Tradition, Genuine or Spurious. *Journal of American Folklore* 97: 273-290.

Keene, Dennis T. P.

1986 Kaho'olawe Island: Hawai'i Ethnic Significance Overview. Copy in Hawaiian/Pacific Collection, Hamilton Library, University of Hawaii at Mānoa.

Keesing, Roger

1987 Anthropology as Interpretive Quest. *Current Anthropology* 28:161-169.

1989 Creating the Past: Custom and Identity in the Contemporary Pacific. *The Contemporary Pacific* 1:19-42.

Linnekin, Jocelyn

1982 Selling Hawaiian Culture. *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 6(3): 29.

1985 *Children of the Land: Exchange and Status in a Hawaiian Community*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

1987 Statistical Analysis of the Great Mahele: Some Preliminary Findings. *Journal of Pacific History* 22:15-33.

Trask, Haunani-Kay

1983 Cultures in Collision: Hawai'i and England, 1778. *Pacific Studies* 7: 91-117.

1985 Review of Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History*. *American Ethnologist* 12:784-787.

1986 Review of Jocelyn Linnekin, *Children of the Land: Exchange and Status in a Hawaiian Community*. *Hawaiian Journal of History* 20:232-235.